YOU KNOW

Urban Ministry Conference
First Presbyterian Church — Atlanta, GA
Martin Luther King, Jr. Weekend
January 19, 2008

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Micah 6: 6-8
Luke 10: 25-28

I am deeply honored to be here this morning. I have admired and respected George Wirth's ministry for many years. George and Barbara have become dear friends and we are always delighted to have the opportunity to spend time with them. And I have admired and respected this great church, so similar in many ways to the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, for many years as well. These urban churches, strong,

resilient, living their lives thoroughly in these urban environments, with everything the city is — at their doorsteps, are, in my mind, incredibly important for the future of the Christian enterprise. I like to think of them as outposts on a new frontier — the Secular City of the 21st Century.

So I am delighted to be in an urban church that goes about its life and mission with great courage and faithfulness.

And I am honored to be here, in Atlanta, on Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend. He is perhaps the main reason I am a Presbyterian minister. I know I am not unique in that, that there is a generation of us, who came of age

in the 1960s, in the midst of all the ferment and upheaval and who saw in Martin Luther King, Jr. something new and hopeful: a model of Christian discipleship deeply involved in the world, courageously living out Christian faith not in splendid isolation, behind the doors of a beautifully ornate sanctuary, but in the city streets. I was a student at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in 1959. Sometime during that school term one of our professors told us that there was a visiting preacher coming to campus to preach at Rockefeller Chapel on Sunday morning. He was young, but the professor said, he was someone who we might want to keep an eye on. It was, of course, Martin Luther King, Jr. Those were days of deep suspicion of and

disaffection with institutions of all kinds: government, universities, churches — "the institutional church" we used to call it disdainfully, as if there were any other kind. And here was a Baptist minister, an unapologetic churchman, assuming that the Church was a force to be reckoned with, a place where the ideas of justice and peace and compassion, so deeply a part of our religious tradition, were lived out and advocated for and struggled for in the public arena. It was that vision of what the Church could be — what the Church is when it is most faithfully the Church, that captivated me forty years ago and captivates me still.

So thank you for allowing me to be here — in this urban church — on this important Sunday.

There are some things you just know.

You know — in your heart, your mind, your soul, your very bones. You know when you see the real thing — when the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra presents a stirring performance of a Beethoven symphony, you know you have just experienced world-class music, the real thing. When you watch the Braves, the Falcons on a good day, or the University of Georgia which played some very good football this fall — you know you are witnessing world-class athleticism, win or lose, the real thing.

You know when you see a forest of maples and elms and birches in full fall color that you are seeing exquisite and precious beauty. You know the skill of the surgeon. You know acts of kindness and mercy. You know courage. And you know real religion when you see it. Mother Teresa of Calcutta for instance, who devoted her life to caring for the sick and dying in the streets of Calcutta, bringing love and compassion and dignity into lives utterly lost, all the while struggling with the darkness of her own doubt.

You know when you see that kind of authenticity, that genuine humanness, you are seeing real religion.

Sadly, you don't always see it in religious institutions. Sadly, religious institutions sometimes seem more interested in arguing and fighting, keeping people out, building exclusive barriers behind which to protect purity, I suppose, and in the process showing the world a religion that is mean spirited, tight fisted, and with very little resemblance to Jesus, its founder.

Will Campbell is a grouchy Southern Baptist social activist who laments the capture of his denomination by the far right, introduces a book of essays *Soul Among Lions*, by confessing that the essays "express the chafing of an old man grown weary of what he sees as institutional nonsense." On the topic of the place of women which the Southern

Baptists recently have relegated to the kitchen, Campbell challenges his church to simply read the Bible. "'There is neither male nor female' St. Paul said. That's a real shocker." Campbell quips "A lot of (Baptists) claim to believe everything in the Bible. But neither male nor female? Then how come most of our ministers are men?" (p. 12).

You know . . .

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Some things we know.

It is a familiar text — it's very old, centuries before Jesus. The prophet Micah describes a courtroom scene. God's people are on trial, ordered to give an accounting, and they ask an important question, the Old Testament equivalent of "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" a very good question a lawyer one time asked Jesus.

"What does God want of us?" "With what shall I come before the Lord?"

Then comes a recitation of the conventional wisdom of the day . . .

"Shall I bring to God burnt offerings, calves a year old? Or will the Lord be pleased with

me if I bring rams,

thousands of them? Or perhaps ten

thousand rivers of oil will

get the job done. Or does

God want me to give my

precious firstborn child?”

In one way or another, those were the answers to the basic religious question provided by the tribal cultures around Israel in the ancient world. And they kept finding their way into Israel’s religion, too. God wants our stuff, our most valuable stuff. The more valuable the gift the more God will be pleased with us and bless us. Actually it’s not unlike what some of the televangelists promise their audiences. Send me a generous contribution and God will bless you richly.

But then comes one of the great moments in the history of religious ideas, a theological sea change, a moment that will be defining for God's people, Israel, and for the followers of Jesus.

God doesn't want lambs and rams and oil and your firstborn.
God has told you what is good:
do justice
love kindness
walk humbly with your God.

Consider first what this says about who God is. God is of course the all-powerful, transcendent other — a God not unlike all the deities of ancient religions. But now there's a new idea —

God cares. God has a heart. God is involved with human life. God cares particularly about and wants justice for the small, the weak, the vulnerable, the widows and orphans, the children and the stranger and the prisoner. It is a new and amazing idea of God, a God who cares, and that idea, we Christians believe, was spoken in an eloquent and ultimate way in an event we celebrated on December 25, the birth of Jesus Christ, God's love and compassion and caring and justice born among us.

What God wants from us is that the weak and vulnerable ones will receive justice which means simply not being exploited, or marginalized, or discriminated against but being treated

equitably and fairly and compassionately, and cared for.

And consider what this means for religion and for the church — what God wants to see in the church is a little justice, some kindness and some humility. Those, not size, power, budgets, growth, are the criteria by which we are to measure ourselves.

N. T. Wright, an Anglican Bishop and distinguished New Testament scholar whom some are calling the C. S. Lewis for our age, has written a new book, *Simply Christian*. Wright is more conservative theologically than liberal and he speaks to a wide and diverse readership. In that book, *Simply Christian*, he says, "Despite what many

people think, within the Christian family and without it, the point of Christianity is not 'to go to heaven when you die.' The New Testament picks up from the Old the theme that God intends, in the end, to put the whole creation to rights" (p. 217). That is why every human being longs for the day when other human beings are no longer wronged, a day when people live in peace with one another, because justice is a reality God put in the human heart, Wright argues. And that is why you don't have to teach a child about fairness. We come with a sense of justice wired into us, Wright says.

The year 2007 is the 100th anniversary of the publishing of one of the most important and influential

books of our time, a book that literally changed the way people think and therefore changed the world. The book is *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, by Walter Rauschenbusch. From that book came an idea and a movement called the "Social Gospel."

Rauschenbusch was a German Baptist pastor whose first call was to a small immigrant congregation in Hell's Kitchen in New York City. "Through his congregation he was introduced to overcrowded tenements with high rent, horrendous working conditions rewarded by intolerably low wages, lack of heat in the winter, and lack of recreational facilities in the summer, all accompanied by consistent hunger and substandard health facilities. As a

pastor, Rauschenbusch realized that in order to serve the spiritual needs of his congregation he had to address the whole of their lives" (Forward, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century*, Paul Rauschenbusch).

So he wrote a book in which he said that Christianity is not a purely ascetic retreat from the world — as most Christians and churches of the day believed — but a project to transform the world in the here and now — a Social Gospel. Crowded, overpriced tenements are a Christian's and the Church's business. Economic exploitation of the poor is a "national sin" he said. The Church is called to be in the world and to change it, to be part of a transformation that will extend God's

justice and compassion to the poor and the weak and the most vulnerable.

Jim Wallis, Editor of *Sojourners* magazine and an Evangelical with impeccable credentials and also a social conscience —wrote a best seller, *God is Not a Republican or a Democrat: How the Right Got it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It.* In a new book about to be published, *The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith and Politics in a Post-Religious Right America,* Wallis urges Christians of all denominations to stand together on common ground, which is happening: The National Association of Evangelicals is talking about global warming, Rick Warren is sponsoring AIDS conferences, and Bill Hybels is talking about poverty and war. Wallis

urges both sides to step down from their identification with one ideological camp, party or the other, Republican-Democrat, Red-Blue, Liberal-Conservative and together work on matters Jesus cared about — poverty, racial and economic justice, health, inclusion of the outsider and peace. Thanks be to God, it is happening. And it is not only encouraging but enormously important for the future of religion in our culture.

What you are doing in Atlanta is incredibly important. Your very presence on this busy thoroughfare is a witness to God's lively presence in the world. Your outreach ministries with the poor, the vulnerable, the marginalized bears eloquent witness to

the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news of the one who reached out to welcome all, whose inclusive love touched all those no one else would touch, lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes, the unclean, the poor.

I came across a commencement speech Bill Gates delivered at Harvard last June. He told the graduates how proud his mother was when he was admitted to Harvard and how she never stopped pressing him to do more for others. At a bridal event a few days before his wedding, when she was critically ill with cancer — she read aloud a letter she had written to her son and his bride at the end of which she quoted the Bible, "For those to whom much is given, much is expected."

“Take on an issue” Gates said, “a complex problem, a deep inequity. Don’t let complexity stop you. When you return 30 years from now — I hope you will judge yourselves, not on your professional accomplishments alone, but also on how well you have addressed the world’s deepest inequities.”

Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly — sometimes they come together in a single encounter. The late Thurgood Marshall, Supreme Court Justice, was one of the young lawyers who argued the Brown v. Board of Education case which ended the injustice of legal school segregation, one time said:

“People are people–strike them and they will cry out; cut them and they will bleed; starve them, and they wither away and die. But treat them with respect and decency, give them equal access to the levers of power, attend to their aspirations and grievances, and they will flourish and grow and . . . join together to form a more perfect union.”

I was reminded of that recently when I was on an important nighttime mission. We were in San Diego visiting a son, daughter-in-law, and two-year-old granddaughter. We had a long and busy and happy day and as bedtime approached, my son made a terrible discovery. “Bobby” was missing.

“Bobby” is the name of a cuddly stuffed bunny whose body is a soft blanket which is very important to 2-year-old Fiona. A bedtime disaster loomed. We had to find Bobby. We had ended the day at a playground, we recalled seeing Fiona holding Bobby while she was swinging, and we concluded that Bobby became lost somewhere on the playground. My son and I jumped in the car and headed to the playground, a big playground with lots of swings and slides and things to crawl on and through and over. It was dark now and the playground abandoned when we arrived and started our search. There was a lot of territory to cover and many possibilities, including bushes and trash cans. As we searched, a pick up truck pulled in the parking lot arrived and an

Hispanic man got out and walked toward us. I was just a little uneasy — we were alone and it was dark — I was feeling a little vulnerable — my wallet was in my pocket. He returned to the truck and escorted a woman, his wife, and three children to the playground. We continued our search as the family's children began to play on the swings. The oldest child, a girl of 13 or 14, approached and asked what we were looking for. We told her — a child's blanket. "We'll help" she said. So now there were eight of us and, sure enough, before very long one of the children found Bobby, a little dusty, but very much intact. When the family gathered around us to return the blanket we attempted to thank them. I took out my wallet and handed the girl a

twenty dollar bill and asked to thank her father and her mother for their kindness. They spoke together. She handed the twenty dollar bill back to me. Her father refused to take it. "He doesn't want money" she said. "If you want to help him, he needs a job. He's a very good carpenter and works hard and we need for him to find a job."

I was deeply touched and a little chastened for my initial anxiety and for forgetting Thurgood Marshall's wisdom that we are all the same: we love our children and our grandchildren, we want to be able to provide for them. We want a little fairness and human kindness.

You know what is good, the prophet said. You know what God requires:

do justice
love kindness
walk humbly with your God.

Those few sentences from a Hebrew prophet who spoke and wrote 2,700 years ago forever change the way people see God — and the way they view religion and its purpose and one thing further. They forever change the way we think about our own lives. Micah's question was reflected in a question Jesus was asked one time: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" It's a variation on "What does the Lord require." And Jesus' answer is as simple and elegant as the prophet's: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as

yourself” . . . “Do this and you will live” Jesus said. That is a word for the church: this church, every church. And it is a word for you and me.

God intends to transform the world into a place of justice and kindness and humility and God has made us responsible for the project during our lifetime. It has gone on before we arrived, and others will take up the task when we have gone. But for now it is ours.

And God intends to transform you and me — to bring us to life, to full and deeply satisfying, and fully human life.

God wants that for you and me so much, so desperately and strongly, that

God sent Jesus to show us what it looks like.

Amen